



# LOWCOUNTRY COMMUNITY CHURCH

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## **Serving Our Neighbors With Service Animals Well** **By Pastor Jeff Cranston** **July 1, 2019**

One of the greatest honors we have as a community church in Bluffton is serving not only area residents but welcoming hundreds of visitors each year. Welcoming newcomers has always been an essential part of LowCountry Community Church's mission and calling since our founding in 1994. To that end, we work hard to train a dedicated team of volunteers to help visitors feel at home, find their way, and rush to assist those with special needs. We have great respect for our friends, neighbors, and visitors who overcome physical challenges to attend church, and it is our privilege to worship with and assist them in every way possible. Our services to those with special needs include, but are not limited to, early seating for those who need specific assistance, room to accommodate mobility issues, curb service and walking assistance for those to whom it is helpful.

For 24 years, we were delighted to be able to safely serve our respected attendees with service animals. However, the American Disabilities Act Title III requires any facility allowing service animals to also allow virtually any animal, at all times, with minimal restrictions on areas of access. This law also disallows requiring documentation for a service animal or asking the animal owner to sit in a designated area. While churches and private clubs are exempt from this law, it is our greatest desire to not only accommodate but lovingly welcome and serve anyone and everyone. However, allowing an unlimited number of potentially uncertified animals, with minimal venue restrictions, as the existing law requires, would be a safety risk to the approximately 2,500 people who attend events in our facility each week, including those with severe allergies and emotional reactions to animals. To avoid restricting access to anyone, we have sought legal counsel to find ways we could safely accommodate service animals while protecting the health of the thousands of people who utilize our venue weekly.

Finding no legal way to continue allowing service animals, while restricting untrained, unsafe animals, we reluctantly, but responsibly instituted a policy in April 2018 restricting access of all animals. This is the same law banning service animals from many hospitals. This was a difficult decision made with the safety of everyone in mind and with multiple avenues for our staff and volunteers to assist our friends and neighbors in need of specific assistance.

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We had the privilege of meeting a young man as our 11 a.m. church service was underway on June 30, 2019, who was a first-time visitor and, like a number of our current congregants, is sight impaired. However, this gentleman was accompanied by his service animal. After welcoming him, our volunteer explained to him the current law, the safety issues around allowing access of any and all animals, and offered to provide human assistance that would enable him to attend without the use of the service animal. The young man said he would indeed return the following week without his service animal and he was assured of the ready assistance of our volunteer team. Therefore, we were surprised to learn via social media of his subsequent comments, and we share his concern over the inadequacies of the ADA Title III. We hope the law can be altered to allow legitimate use of service animals in private venues such as our church and would like to be a part of the solution for others navigating these challenges. We have reached out to our neighbor who visited us to discuss further ways in which we can assist and serve him and would be honored to work with him to enhance the lives of those with special physical needs.

LowCountry Community Church (LCC), located in Bluffton, South Carolina was founded in 1994. The church with a weekly attendance of some 2,500 and is known for reaching out to the community through shoe donations, community projects and helping community partners like the Boys & Girls Club, Bluffton Self Help, Samaritan's Purse, and Allendale Prison. LCC was the regional hub for Samaritan's Purse Disaster when Hurricane Matthew hit Bluffton, SC in 2016.

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